



‘Stifled sojourns in Anna Burns’ *Milkman*: A culture of coercion?

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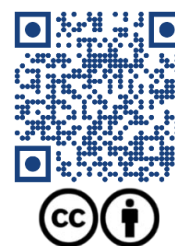
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Abstract— This text examines the contours of the life of the female protagonist in Burn’s *Milkman*, set in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and how this character’s life is heavily conditioned by community gossip in the manner in which it exerts influence and control over her life and the wider lived experience of the community in question.

Keywords— Community Gossip, Female Protagonist, Social Control, Northern Ireland Conflict, Cultural Conditioning



Introduction

This paper seeks to analyse the contours of a heavily conditioned community in Northern Ireland in the 1970s through the experiences of the protagonist, an unnamed young woman who stands as the narrator throughout the novel. The examination of this story seeks to unearth the cultural cross currents that conditioned imagined and actual living conditions in an already traumatised community as revealed in a fictional account of how one woman’s life is largely controlled by hearsay originated in and sustained by the community around her which she has grave difficulty escaping from.

Attention is also directed towards examining the potency of language manifested in conversation as depicted through fictional dialogues between key characters that denote the changing nodes of communication/adhesion and the intensity of their presence within the life of the community in question (i.e. Northern Ireland). It seeks to discover whether ever greater entanglement of an individual within such a system ultimately results in their estrangement from the host culture.

Burn’s novel consists of a series of conversations between the unnamed female protagonist as she attempts to deal with

a constant stream of rumours generated by incessant gossip about her instigated by other women in the community.

The reader is quickly catapulted into the raging tensions of a fictional community in Northern Ireland where paramilitary politics is the unofficial government. No characters are given proper names and so the reader is left to concentrate on contemplating circumstances more extensively than perhaps would otherwise be expected. The central element of this novel is the factor of control by means of a community narrative directed toward a specific chosen target, which takes the form of gossip. In his 2021 book *Small World: Ireland, 1798-2018*, Prof. Seamus Deane observes that in *Milkman*:

This first-person voice is the register for all voices; everybody speaks in it, or is reported as having spoken in it, almost all improbably and polysyllabically articulate. They are both loquacious and eloquent deploying the trusted ironic Irish device of counterpointing such speech with the actualities of their materially and culturally impoverished lives. The collision between archaic syntax and vocabulary, both beautifully controlled, and the conditions of cheap

consumer surfeit capitalism and neo-colonial civil war produces a series of grotesque detonations.

(Deane, 2021: 243)

Page 1 of the novel sketches out the dynamics at play in this community heavily conditioned by gossip:

The day Somebody McSomebody put a gun to breast and called me a cat and threatened to shoot me was the same day the milkman died. He had been shot by one of the state hit squads and I did not care about the shooting of this man. Others did care though, and some were those who in the parlance 'knew me to see but not to speak to' and I was being talked about because there was a rumour started by them, or more likely by first brother-in-law, that I had been having an affair with this milkman and that I was eighteen and he was forty-one (...)

(Burns, 2018: 1)

What may be fact or perhaps even fable cannot be distinguished one from the other. Gossip takes on the role of the governing narrative of the community and this has the effect of conditioning and controlling all those caught up in its composition. Such is the power of this gossip, that its content is treated as truth in the assumption that whether or not any veracity lies behind any charges or assertions is irrelevant as the mere mention of its apparent existence within the gossip gives it meaningful status as evident as any genuine truth.

Information heard through means of gossip is thus believed without further doubt:

I knew his age, not because he got shot and it was given by the media, but because there had been talk before this, for months before the shooting, by these people of the rumour, that forty-one and eighteen was disgusting, that he was married and not to be fooled by me for there were plenty of quiet unnoticeable people who took a bit of watching.

(Burns, 2018: 1)

From the outset it is clear that the instrument of gossip is also means of surveillance so as to augment control over elements of the community, but particularly exerted by women over other women as well as serving as means to criticise the actions and behaviour of men. As Schantz (2008: 11) has noted, gossip can be seen as

a kind of archetypal model of women using their informal connections both to sustain themselves on a daily basis and to intervene in the machinations of men, and it is therefore the most

basic mode of what I call female networking. (...) the power of gossip to counter the abuses of unscrupulous men.

The protagonist lives in a world of paramilitarism and is constantly assailed by reminders of its presence in form of the men that comprise the membership of such illegal organisations. Such is the reduced power – although not totally absent – of women, they make imaginative use of their words and networks to highlight and chastise supposed-wrongdoers and practitioners of varying levels of infringements. It is the protagonist herself who is the general target of these activities throughout the novel. Moreover, the nature of this gossip is indicative of Deane's reference to 'culturally impoverished lives' and what he observes as 'a series of grotesque denotations' that materialised through some ever more vigorous and violent incidents.

We find the protagonist at pains to carefully and tortuously clarify every element of her thinking and speech for fear of being misunderstood, mislabelled and ultimately her fear for being punished for adopting an incorrect position whether or not it she actually made any such utterances. Allowances are made for the existence of certain conventions, but all other possible deviations are carefully avoided and carefully explained if they must be mentioned at all:

(...) Now and then we might make an effort and say 'defender' or 'renouncer' though only when attempting to enlighten outsiders, for mostly we didn't bother when it was ourselves. 'Us' and 'them' was second nature: convenient, familiar, insider, and these words were off-the-cuff, without the strain of having to remember and grapple with massaged phrases as diplomatically correct niceties. By unspoken agreement which outsiders couldn't grasp unless it should come to their own private expedencies – it was unanimously understood that when everybody here use the tribal identifiers of 'us' or 'them', of 'their religion' or 'our religion', not all of us and not all of them was, it goes without saying, to be taken as read.

(Burns, 2018: 22)

Challenging assumptions

The reader is challenged to notice and understand what should or should not be 'taken as read'. Such is the velocity of the gossip at play a strong degree of instability persists which frustrates attempts to arrive at a reliable interpretation of the message being transmitted by the gossip itself. The aforementioned 'private expedencies' have a strong role to play in fortifying individuals as they attempt to live under such complex circumstances. However, it is impossible to

ignore the armed conflict that almost became a civil war at times which challenged not only bodily integrity but logical reasoning, the latter of which remains under siege as we can see: 'Naïvete? Tradition? Reality? War going on and people in a hurry? Take your pick though the answer is the last one. In those early days those darker of the dark days there wasn't time for vocabulary watchdogs, for political correctness. (...)' (Burns, 2018: 22).

Aspersions are cast and images made and this means that gossip functions in that, Patricia Spacks view it:

...manifests itself as distilled malice. It plays with reputations, circulating truths and half-truths and falsehoods about the activities, sometimes about the motives and feelings, of others. Often it serves serious (possibly unconscious) purposes for the gossipers, whose manipulations of reputation can further political or social ambitions by damaging competitors or enemies, gratify envy and rage by diminishing another, generate an immediately satisfying sense of power, although the talkers acknowledge no such intent.

(Spacks, 1985: 3-5)

While it is not openly acknowledged, the power of gossip to condition is actively used by unnamed female figures in *Milkman* to elicit information to refute allegations made or to confirm charges advanced and thus control behaviour through such devices as 'manipulations of character'. There is no real doubt that malicious intent is at play.

The presence of the Union Jack is rejected in nationalist areas and is contested as a symbol of the state of Northern Ireland by those who oppose the union so that its mere presence elicits immediate suspicion:

It was not a flag greatly welcomed in our community. Not a flag at all welcomed in our community. There weren't any, not any, this side of the road. What I was gathering, therefore, for I was not up on cars but was up on flags and emblems, was that those vintage, classic Blower Bentleys made in that country 'over the water' came with the flag on from that country 'over the water.' Reading between the lines, therefore, of maybe-boyfriend's neighbour's comment – what was maybe-boyfriend doing he implied, not only partaking in a raffle in which he might have won the bit with the flag on, but what was he doing, partaking in a raffle to win any bit – flag or no flag – of such a patriotic nation – defining, 'over the water' symbol at all? Historical injustice he said. Repressive legislation, he said. Practice of and pacts for, he said. Artificial boundaries, he said. Propping up of corruption, he said. Arrest without

charge he said. Prohibition of inquests, he said. Institutionalized violation of sovereignty and territory, he said. (...)

(Burns, 2018: 26)

As is abundantly clear from this densely-packed fragment of dialogue, multiple issues pertaining to identity, membership of in and out-groups as well as worries about possible suspicions are part and parcel of the lives of the character's in Burns' fictional Northern Irish city. While not the solely vocal character, the protagonist is directly affected by all the suspicion and innuendo that is infused into every conversation and interaction through the medium of pervasive dialogue across the community in which she lives.

Sectarianism is a central theme of *Milkman* and the nationalist community in which the protagonist lives remains extremely vigilant in its efforts to distinguish and defend itself against the slightest suggestion of acquiescence or cooperation with the 'other' side. Enormous energy is expended on maintaining this veil of separation and the existence of this narrative sustains a certain level of coercion over all members of the community. Ample evidence of this runs throughout the novel as the following tract attests:

(...) he said, 'don't get me wrong or anything or anything, and obviously I'm saying this from a place of humility, and it's not that I've got experience in desiring to take part in anything disloyal to my own community, something that might involve winning something that had that flag on, then bringing it home, then being proud to have it in my area instead of being ashamed to have it in my area. Far be it for me to, to asperse anything or anybody, to sow seeds of rancour. I'm not a stirrer-upper of rules or a summarizer of conclusions and no expert am I either or inciter or bigot; in fact, ignorant as I am and gingerly as I hesitate to voice an opinion but...' – then, he repeated all that about no matter how famous and coveted was the thing with the flag on, he himself wouldn't deign to legitimate such an ensign of oppression, of tragedy of tyranny, not to mention the bad taste left in the mouth of losing face, not so much to the country 'over the water', as to that community 'over the road.'

(Burns, 2018: 27)

Of particular note here are the words 'wouldn't deign to legitimate such an ensign of oppression, of tragedy of tyranny'. While this refers to the nationalist community's abhorrence for any act of aiding or abetting the British government to remain in control of their country, it is also a

highly ironic assertion since the power of such statements themselves stifling and have a chilling effect on the very community it is claimed to protect. The use of loaded language to affect control across communities remains relatively placid until local paramilitaries periodically engage in acts of violent intimidation and physical assault as a reminder of their presence and power. A subtle reminder of this practice comes in the form of when the narrator mentions how:

It was that people were quick to point fingers, to judge, to add on even in peaceful times, so it would be hard to fathom fingers not getting pointed and words not being added, also being judged in these turbulent times, resulting too, not in having your feelings hurt upon discovering others were talking about you, as in having individuals in balaclavas and Halloween masks, guns at the ready, turning up in the middle of the night at your door.

(Burns, 2018: 28)

Gossip thus represents a powerful instrument of social control and it is used to full effect by the powerbrokers of the Burn's novel. While its substance may be difficult to quantify, its effect is real. This tendency has been clearly identified in the work of Blakey Vermeule (2006) who has asserted that:

Even the most casual reader of social fiction will recognize that gossiping is what characters do most passionately. However, they can neither admit nor be aware of it. Only minor or morally compromised characters are allowed to indulge in its pleasure. Matronly middle-aged women, chatty maids, little girls, and effeminate fops are the ones who gossip; their more reflective counterparts—the men and women designated as heroes and heroines—only briefly tolerate such idle chatter. Gossip is derided, decried, condemned, and maligned. It is womanish, low, slavish, servantish, silly, pert, loose, wanton, jiggetty, mean. (...) Gossip has always been a part of charivari with the power to turn the world upside down. It also has the power to destroy lives (...)

(Vermeule, 2006: 102)

Vermeule's assertion indicates the contempt in which the medium of gossip is held, but once again her analysis recognises the tangible power of the medium itself to the level that lives can be demolished should those who wield the medium direct their efforts with sufficient determination and force at specific targets. This remains a central theme throughout *Milkman*.

Stifled sojourns

As the character's attempt to navigate their lives within such a tension-filled terrorism-tinged community, the issues of privacy and intimacy are also frustrated by the near-schizophrenic self-correction and mutual suspicion and potential – real or imagined – threats being dangled in the air before people in public and in private. This issue affects the protagonist as she and her casual-temporary boyfriend negotiate their *situationship* in a vein of mutual naivety and immaturity which are both products and causes of the strained-state of human relations in Burn's presumed Northern Irish city. Each act of tenderness, each cautious step forward is continually frustrated as the couple grapple with their romance within a strained environment the suspicious mindset that stems from it. The protagonist's description of their struggles captures this situation vividly:

Always it happened. I would suggest closeness as a way of forwarding on our relationship and it would backfire and I'd forget I'd suggested it would backfire and I'd forget I'd suggested closeness and he'd have to remind me when next I suggested closeness. Then the boot would be on the other foot and he'd suffer a misfiring of neurons and go and suggest closeness himself.

Constantly we were having memory lapses, episodes of a kind of *jamais vu*. We wouldn't remember that we'd remembered and would have to remind each other of our forgetfulness and of how closeness didn't work for us given the state of the delicacy our maybe-relationship was in. And how it was his turn to forget and to say that he thought I should consider us living together, because we'd been nearly a year now into our 'maybe' capacity, so feasibly we could forward on proper coupledness by cohabiting. It wasn't as if either, he said, we've previously discussed closeness or moving in together – which, when he finished speaking, I'd have to remind him that we had. (...)

A tortuous game of slight advancement and cautious retreat continually retards the ability of the couple to grow their amorous attachment into a mature relationship. Constant fear and mistiming further complicates matters as each party declines opportunities to clearly affirm their feelings for one another. As these problems persist, so too do unfounded, yet persistent rumours of the romantic connection between the protagonist and a key powerful paramilitary figure in the community. Although based on lies since there is no connection at all, the rumours prove damaging in respect of the mother-daughter relationship and also cause an erosion in the barrier between public and private life embodied by

privacy. This, as Vermeule has noted, 'has the power to destroy lives and to derail love...If it is ever innocent, it is only because it is meaningless' (Vermeule, 2006: 102). Thus, what would otherwise be idle gossip sustained by vacuous rumour is given meaning by those members of the community in search of power and meaning themselves. This is in evidence when the protagonist is once again forced to deny rumours turned charged levelled against by her own mother which have to do with the fact that:

I told her I wasn't having an affair with him, nor had I ever wished for an affair that instead, it has been him, solely him, pursuing and importuning as it seemed, to start an affair with me. I said he'd approached me twice, only twice, and I explained the circumstances of each meeting. (...) I ended by admitting that I hadn't wanted to tell out any of this not just to her but to anyone. I said this was because of the twisting of words, the fabrication of words, and the exaggeration of words that went on in this place. I'd have lost power, such as was my power, if I'd tried to explain and to win over all those gossiping about me. So I'd kept silent, I said. I'd asked no questions, answered no questions, gave no confirmation, no refutation. That way, I said, I'd hoped to maintain a border to keep my mind separate. That way I said I'd hoped to ground and protect myself.

(Burns, 2018: 54)

The protagonist seeks to protect her own mental integrity and remain separate to the malicious conversations taking place about her in the wider community. Yet, her attempts at non-engagement are treated as her way of confirming such claims. The fabric of human dignity: privacy is thus under attack in this way as the protagonist grapples with fading attachment with those who love her due to the effect of mistruth propagated by continuous malicious gossip.

Cultural control: the instrument of gossip

Community gossip functions not only as an instrument of social control, but also as an effective policing device which is clear from how the narrator regards these commentaries where even one's best attempts at detached are usually unsuccessful:

(...) I myself paid little attention to the problems but I paid at least the minimum, something I could not have avoided because of osmosis. Brother-in-law, however, paid no attention either to osmosis, to the very noticeable social and political upheaval of the time and the place he was living in. (...) Drinking, fighting and rioting were run-of-the-mill, customary necessary even, as hardly to be discerned as mental aberrations. Also hardly to be

discerned as an aberration was all that repertoire of gossip, secrecy and communal policing, plus the rules of what was allowed and not allowed that featured heavily in this place. Regarding the slight aberrations, the convention was to rub along with, to turn a blind eye, because life was being attempted where you had to cut corners; impossible therefore, to give one hundred per cent. (...)

(Burns, 2018: 59)

Ordinary human desires such as free imagination and explorations of romantic entanglements as well as other mundane matters are foreclosed as meaningful choices given the near-totalitarian level of self-inflicted gossip-centred behavioural control where some degree of mental distance is required even to survive. A minor escape from all this tension is secured when the protagonist signs up for French lessons but even seemingly innocent questions illuminate the limits that have grown up around their ability to imagine the world. A remark from the French teacher sets this process in motion with the realisation that the existence of choices can sometimes also represent an undesired source of danger:

(...) 'So, class,' said the teacher after this applause had died down, 'is it that you think the sky can only be blue?'

'The sky is blue,' came us. 'What colour else can it be?'

Of course we knew really that the sky could be more than blue, two more but why should any of us admit to that? I myself never admitted to it. Not even the week before when I experienced my first sunset with maybe-boyfriend did I admit it. Even then, even though there were more colours than the acceptable three in the sky – blue (the day sky), black (the night sky) and white (clouds) – that evening still I kept my mouth shut. And now the others in this class – all older than me, some as old as thirty – also weren't admitting it. It was the convention not to admit it, not to accept detail for this type of detail would mean choice and choice would mean responsibility and what if we failed in our responsibility?

A problematic paradigm

And what of this so-called 'failure of responsibility'? *Who* has failed at *what*? Is the inability or refusal to exercise one's capacity to think or make choices the greater evil or the merely a symptom of a dysfunctional society? The protagonist appears to recognise these dynamics but her reaction to the question indicates the level of conditioning

and intimidation that has permeated throughout the community. Dreaming of alternatives is thus strongly discouraged as being beyond the realms of the possible or an occasion to face unpleasant truths which nobody really wishes to face under the existing climate.

Deep reflection of the dull reality of life is discouraged but not entirely absent as people are aware of their own discontent. Hope, however, remains a rare commodity:

(...) yet most people I knew weren't happy. Neither in this workaday world, in this little-human-being world, did we spend time counting blessings and eschewing the relative in favour of the eternal. That relative, that temporal plane – where sensitivities vary, where no one has the same personal history even if they have the same communal history, where something which is a trigger for one person passes off unnoticed by another person – definitely was the plane where the raw living of life and the imperfect mental response to that living of life took place.

(Burns, 2018: 88)

Once again, this provides an illustration of Deane's reference to 'culturally impoverished lives' which relies on personal initiative and resilience to sustain the wider community – personal survival takes precedence over cultural development. What passes as a noble lie consensus substitutes obvious truths which cannot be openly acknowledge, a practice which offers comfort and stability that is exhibited in the narrative toward the end of the novel which observers:

(...) unadmitted sorrow which does every uneven relationship but also about the distorted forms which can be taken by unexamined social consensus. Only a part of the truth can ever be grasped by each person, but never the whole story: yet in order to function, the community needs to agree to believe in certain lies

(Burns, 2018: 408-9)

Sustaining the imagined existence of an agreed collective illusion requires fabricating the substance of its content and this frequently involves targeting certain individuals as is the case with the protagonist who is constantly rumoured to be a lover of a known paramilitary, popularly known as the milkman. The weight of history is present everywhere, if not fully acknowledge in mind, physical routine does, however, fully reflect this reality. Nuanced placid thoughts are periodically interrupted by sporadic and deliberate acts of violence where:

Drinking, fighting and rioting were run-of-the-mill, customary necessary even, as hardly to be

discerned as mental aberrations. Also hardly to be discerned as an aberration was all that repertoire of gossip, secrecy and communal policing, plus the rules of what was allowed and not allowed that featured heavily in this place. Regarding the slight aberrations, the convention was to rub along with, to turn a blind eye, because life was being attempted where you had to cut corners; impossible therefore, to give one hundred per cent.

(Burns, 2018: 59)

Doubts about the nature of the contours of represented reality are sometimes alleviated through its own problematic nature since according to Seamus Deane: '...oral lore...can impose a shape where there may be no conclusive pattern' (Deane, 2021: 414).

It is made clear to the reader that while there is no universal consensus on a favourable view towards violence, there is broad agreement that acquiescence is necessary to secure survival. Such tacit agreement requires a determined degree of mental reticence that merely registers rather than condones acts of intimidation and violence carried in pursuance of broader political objectives. Day-to-day realities dominate this experience such as that of imposing individuals in the form of the milkman who is portrayed as a contradictory presence in that:

Thing was he hadn't physically touched me. Nor that last time had he even looked at me. So where was my premise for speaking out on how, uninvited, he was pushing in? But that was what it was like here. Everything had to be physical, had to be intellectually reasonable in order to be comprehensible.

(Burns, 2018: 64)

What counts as intellectually reasonable in such a community is achieved by meeting the objectives of the politically-charged atmosphere, all other considerations are mentally suppressed and effectively forgotten. Moral beliefs are held at a premium, the price of which could be exacted in ideological and physical clashes with the power-wielding paramilitaries who leave no vacuum to develop in respect of the extension of their power and influence over their own communities. Ongoing social strife makes the business of ordinary living nearly-impossible, so members of the communities inhabit a zone of moral ambiguity in order to sustain their own mental integrity in which the most precious of commodities, truth – is traded for relative safety and psychological predictability. These difficulties are faced by communities on both sides of the border in how

(...) This dilemma consisted of, once again, those inner contraries, the moral ambiguities, the

difficulty of entering fully into the truth. Here were the Johns and Mary of this world, trying to live civilian lives as ordinarily as the political problem here would allow them, but becoming uneasy, no longer certain of the moral correctness of the means by which our custodians of honour were fighting for the cause. This was not just because of the deaths and the mounting deaths, but also the injuries, the forgotten damage, all that personal and private suffering stemming from successful renouncer operations. And as the renouncers' power and assumption of power increased, so too, did the uneasiness of the Johns and Marys increase, regardless too, that the other side – 'over there' – 'across the road' – 'across the water' – would be hard at it, doing their own versions of destruction as well.

(Burns, 2018: 119)

Renouncers are those characters who actively work against the presence and priorities of the British state in Northern Ireland. As nationalist feeling grows in the period of the 1970s and 1980s, so too does the power enjoyed by paramilitary groups formed to opposed British rule who do all in their power to demonise those on the either side of the physical and ideological barrier. The polarisation of language precipitates the polarisation of politics and promotes the active demonisation of any person, community or sympathizers. Near-totalitarian rule ensues with virtually unchecked power of the paramilitaries, situations which involved factors in which: '(...) *It so happened though that in the set up of the time, in each of those totalitarian-run enclaves, it was the male paramilitaries who, more than anyone, ruled over the areas with final say*' (Burns, 2018: 120).

Challenges to hegemonic male control

While almost exclusively male in composition, these paramilitary groups are still reliant on the goodwill and agreement of the women of the wider community for the continued success of their operations. The illusion of exclusive-male authority is quickly demolished once established nuances or existing moral codes are punctured and just such an incident acts as a catalyst for women's long-standing frustrations to publicly surface and pushback against ruffians. A battle of wills ensues, despite the grotesquely unequal power imbalance against the women:

(...) they warned the issue women not to have her back on pain of her being killed as a spy-agent with they, themselves, severely punished for aiding and abetting the state.

Owing, however, to a burgeoning outlook that encompassed an attitude of confidence and

entitlement, something snapped within the issue women and unexpectedly they declared they would not. What they meant was, they would not be dictated to, that in spite of the eighth woman probably never to return because (she) ruined everything, should she choose to do so, not only would they not reject her, they'd stand foursquare behind her and the renouncers themselves could go hang.

(Burns, 2018: 158)

A temporary truce comes to be established between the parties despite tensions running high, but this does not provide any real relief in the suffering for our polemic protagonist who is said to have had multiple encounters with her presumed lover – the infamous milkman, despite her instinctive alarm in his unwanted company:

That third encounter with the milkman was not the end of the milkman. Further meetings – real ones as well as the communally fabricated ones – also took place... These meetings took place everywhere. I'd pop to the local shops he'd be there. I'd go into town, he'd be there. I'd come out of work, he'd be there. I'd visit a library, he'd be there. Even when I'd go to places and come out of them and he wasn't there, still it seemed as if he was there. (...)

(Burns, 2018: 166)

Rumours supply defects to the circuit of knowledge: where facts are absent, a veneer is quickly erected to bridge the gaps to complete the deception. It does not matter whether or not the protagonist has chosen to be in the milkman's company or not nor how many times she has actually shared his company; gossip becomes truth in the eyes of those peddling it.

Concluding remarks: gossipers - *raison d'être*

Conjecture allies with compliance to sustain the conditions under which gossipers are deemed necessary and become needed as:

Their true nature also would be revealed by the very contaminated, off-kilter atmosphere in which they chose to surround themselves...It was the contrast between that – all those powerful yet invisible indicators – and the supposedly innocuous parenthetical manner my neighbours assumed they were presenting to me that most would reveal to me they were not for whatever reason, coming from the truth...to invoke immoderate emotion in me or to lure me verbally to my detriment. Might have been some personal concern of their own about which vulnerably and

humanly they felt a need to keep silent, but on which nonetheless they needed clarification or information from someone else. With gossips and rumour-mongers-always it came down to scrutiny, to wangling to listening for leverage, to the dedication public opinion here was invested in conjecture, not only abroad but within the Home Circle front.

(Burns, 2018: 173)

Gossipers peddle untruths but in so doing they leave interlocutors and affected parties with little option but to respond – often exasperated – to the force and persistence of such rumours. In so doing, they are legitimizing their existence despite their inherent fallacies. As the reader is later reminded: 'Even at the outer limits of absurdity and contradiction people make up anything. Then they will believe and build this on anything' (Burns, 2018: 306-7).

A state of near-permanent paranoia coupled with a total lack of trust in the policing authorities leave ordinary citizens at the mercy of whatever vigilantes and paramilitaries wish to impose according to the nature of their agenda. The protagonist is left with few options since:

(...) If I'd gone to the authorities to have it officially recorded that he was stalking me, that he was threatening me, that he was making preparations for me, then to seek redress from these authorities as in, what were they going to do about it, our renouncers would have replied – well, I didn't know what they would have replied because he too was a renouncer so why ever would I have gone to them?...According to the police, of course, our community was a rogue community. It was we who were the enemy, we who were the terrorists, the civilian terrorists, the associates of terrorists or simply individuals suspected of being but not yet discovered to be terrorists. (...)

(Burns, 2018: 182)

It can be seen that in such a tense environment, ordinary citizens are largely at the mercy of their local community powerbrokers who operate beyond the law since as a direct result of the chasm in confidence between the community and the state police force. Strong suspicions on both sides ensure that a power vacuum benefits local ruffians so that the local community is left to find its own way through societal difficulties. Strong currents of stress caused by this situation ripple through the community to such an extent that it retards mental processes to the point that trauma trumps logic and this is evident where the protagonist is depicted as encountering her own difficulties in that she:

...was beginning to lose my power of reason, my ability to see obvious connections and to retain even the most elementary sense of how to survive in this place. I can see now, of course, that no matter what I would have done or could have done, these gossips wouldn't have stopped, never would they have ceased and gone away, not until the man himself had gone away, not until the man himself had gone away, after having me and had done with me. At the time though, I said my three words and I displayed my depersonalisation and did succeed in puzzling them.

(Burns, 2018: 177)

Attempts at retention of dignity on the part of the protagonist are met with some success, although this is offset by increasing hostility toward her from the community at large as the stresses involved challenge the integrity of her reasoning powers. A temporary stay is put on the effects of the malicious mouths that populate the vocabulary of the people around her. There is no denying the fact, however, that she her reaction is proof of her manipulation by the gossip itself. From this perspective, we can see how this medium functions as a way to 'identify cooperators and cheaters and advertise their reputations' which is done to apply a standard that identifies whether people can respect the established code in respect of whether 'they are reliable and can be trusted to uphold their end of a bargain' (Vermeule, 2006: 106). Using this instrument as means of social control also ensures that develops 'a generous and linking attention where it is most needed. It is quite simply a cultural politics of interests, of its value and its violence' (Schantz, 2008: 19).

In the traumatised minds and violent streets of Burn's fictitious city, there are ample examples of the presence and operation of this 'cultural politics of interests' which is strongly challenged by Burn's protagonist and her experiences in *Milkman*. In writing as she does, Burns succeeds in adopting a technique described by Booth in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction* as pertaining to the fact that 'in our world where the true chaos of things has at least been realized, only a technique that seems to leave characters genuinely free to face that chaos is tolerable' (Booth, 1983:51). Clearly illustrating the conditions and difficult circumstances within with the protagonist has to live allows the involvement of readers in situations where novels 'may not offer the same kind of information about the world as gossip, they nonetheless involve readers in the same kind of experience: an intimate tête-à-tête with the narrator promising special voyeuristic access into characters' affairs' (Schantz, 2008: 13).

The protagonist's *tête-à-tête* with key members of the community in which she lives is a key indicator of her resistance and stands as an affirmation of her personal identity which she seeks to defend despite the heavy cost involved.

A major question is left to the reader to answer: do we really exercise true autonomy as sovereign individuals in our communities, or are we unwittingly coerced into adopting certain stances and following particular narratives as a reaction to or as a product of societal pressure. *Milkman* allows the reader to gain a foothold within an imaginative space which offers the opportunity to carefully ponder this issue.

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